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ABSTRACT

Several factors are eroding children's right to play. The first is continuing poverty throughout the world. This factor is evident in underdeveloped countries and the inner cities of industrialized countries. Changing cultural values are a second factor in developed societies where indifference toward the importance of play is prevalent. The many activities children are required to participate in and the amount of time they spend viewing television decrease the time they spend in play. The third factor is inadequate environmental planning. Developers do not include play spaces in their community designs; pollution and traffic deter childhood play; and segregation of children in communities prevents the child's day from being an integral part of the life of a neighborhood. The fourth factor is an overemphasis on academic and structured studies in schools and preschools. This academic approach hinders play's functions of helping children grow intellectually and learn social skills. Some preschools in the United States, Italy, and Japan are mentioned as examples of schools in which the child's right to play is a focus of the program. Correlations between family income and preschool enrollment in the United States and other countries are discussed. A 16-item bibliography is provided. (BC)

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THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO PLAY

Presentation to the

United Nations Press Conference

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Marcy Guddemi, Ph.D.

May 8, 1992

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Haiti

Woodcaby Dieujuste sweeps outside his master's house in the Port-au-Prince slum of Solino. He receives no pay and may never see his family again

Pakistan

In hellish fields of mud, whole families work making bricks, often imprisoned by indebtedness that passes from generation to generation. They have a legal right to leave, but few are able to

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"Mankind owes the child the best it has to give."
--United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, 1959

(photographs 1 and 2)

These haunting photographs found just this past week in *Newsweek* Magazine illustrate the fact that many children in the world are NOT experiencing the "best that mankind can give them." For more than three decades now, the Declaration on the Rights of the Child has granted children the right to food and survival, to shelter and protection, to development and education, to freedom and participation---and the right to leisure and play. Even though 117 countries signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the World Summit for Children (September 1990), ratifying their official intent to make these rights legally binding, children in even the most affluent nations are not obtaining their basic rights and needs. Because of my personal and professional commitment to young children and my own research in this area, I will focus today on one particular right: the child's right to play.

Play is very important to children for many reasons (IPA, 1979). Play is a basic need along with nutrition, health, shelter and education. While play defies definition, we do know that it is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous, done purely for pleasure, and has no predetermined

result. Play helps children develop physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Play is a way that children can communicate and express themselves. Play is a means of learning about life itself. While play is universal, knowing no national or cultural boundaries, the fact is play, a crucial element in human development, is becoming scarce.

Many alarming factors are eroding the child's right to play and thus are having a negative impact on children's growth, development, and learning.

1. The first alarming factor is continuing poverty throughout the world (UNICEF, 1990,b). Increasing numbers of children are living with inadequate provision for survival and development because of poverty and sub-standard living conditions. The photographs I shared with you were in an article entitled "Slavery." Slavery and poverty continue in many parts of the world. Many children are forced to work at life sustaining chores such as child rearing, food preparation, planting and harvesting, and manual labor as soon as they are old enough to follow directions or to understand that if they don't work they will be beaten. Poverty forces children to be miniature adults during the preschool years.

When a six year old girl from India was interviewed about play, she said she never played. She had to work. When asked if she ever thought about play, she said no. When asked if she would enjoy running and laughing out there in the field, she responded that she would be beaten if she did. Both the opportunity and even the hope for play are nonexistent for many children.

In the inner cities of industrialized countries, conditions are very similar to third world economies. Children are rearing younger children, performing manual labor for drug money, and begging for food rather than playing. Even if play were possible for any of these children of poverty, the streets in poor, poor villages of underdeveloped third world countries are actually safer for play than right here in inner city New York (Moore, 1990).

2. The second factor is changing cultural values. While there is no time for play in underdeveloped societies, there is an indifference toward the importance of play in developed societies (IPA, 1979). Whereas, children traditionally have been shielded from adult responsibilities and encouraged to play into their late teens or early twenties, now play is increasingly frowned on by parents who want little Billy or little Susie to work and learn at the

earliest possible moment, rather than play. Society believes that play is frivolous, while work is productive. Even the great Maria Montessori called the children's activities in her preschool, work. Children did not "play" in Montessori's schools.

According to both David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* and Neil Postman, author of *The Disappearance of Childhood*, childhood, as an institution, is rapidly disappearing in the United States, and other Western nations. Children have no time to be children. Typically, children are shuttled from music lessons, to scout meetings, to little league or soccer, to dance lessons, to perhaps tutoring, with no time left to play.

Children also are being thrust into adulthood by wearing adult or sexually provocative clothes, by being exposed to sexual and violent situations on TV and radio, and by being forced to handle growing societal stress, such as divorce, job loss, war, and racial injustice. This is particularly true in the urban centers (Elkind, 1981).

Another cultural trend is the increased dependence on TV viewing as part of the daily routine. Preschool children watch an average of 4.5 hours of television daily (Guddemi, 1986). TV viewing is a double negative on the child's right to play. Not only are children negatively affected by what they view, but also time spent watching TV could be time spent playing. My own research in this area shows that children who are heavy viewers of TV have more TV based themes in their dramatic play (rather than domestic themes based on the family or real life experiences that teach them about life itself). Heavy TV viewers initiate less thematic play in general, and overall play fewer minutes of dramatic play (Guddemi, 1986).

3. The third factor eroding the child's right to play is inadequate environmental planning (Moore, 1990). Many cities in their rush to build banks, hotels, malls, and suburbs have forgotten the needs of children. Children need safe spaces in which to play and to be creative.

Developers are not given incentives to build play spaces into their designs. According to a survey by Esbensen in 1979 and later replicated by Moore in 1990, only nine countries had some form of national standards for children's play spaces in residential environments. Children growing up in cities of high density, have as little as 4 square meters of living and playing space per family. Research also shows that the higher the floor of residential occupancy, the less the

children play.

Even suburbs, the answer to crime ridden and crowded inner cities, have few sidewalks and few play spaces devoted to children. Children can't even walk or ride a bike to a friend's house to play. Parents complain that all play experiences must, therefore, be prearranged and require a chauffeur (Boyer, 1991). Developments that do plan for a play or recreation space cater mainly to the adults' needs--clubhouses, tennis, exercise rooms--not to the child's needs.

Traffic is another concern in environmental planning. One thing for certain, there are more and more cars and other vehicles today on all city streets. Pollution and traffic are two serious deterrents of both childhood play and health.

Increasing segregation of children in the community is another planning demise. Cities and neighborhoods are not planned as to include children and spaces for children as an integral part of the community. Many housing units are "child free"--no children allowed at all! Children also suffer segregation from the rest of society by the way they are grouped compartmentally in their daily routine. First children are segregated from the rest of the community in childcare centers, then schools, then into after school programs, then lessons or sports, then into living units. Their day is never an integral part of the neighborhood, but rather a series of separate, child-only groups.

Recently, Earnest Boyer in his book *Ready to Learn* commented, "Children give life to neighborhoods, yet neighborhoods are giving nothing back to children."

4. The final factor which I will mention today is the overemphasis on theoretical, academic, and structured studies in schools and preschools (Elkind, 1987). Many schools and learning settings force young children to sit all day with dittos, paper and pencil tasks, and rote memorization exercises. In some school districts, recess is illegal.

Young children, birth through age eight, learn through play (Guddemi, 1988) not through "skill and drill" or "skill and kill" as I recently heard it so "fondly" called. Children need to touch, play with, and manipulate objects and materials in their environment. Children learn concepts of numerosity as they manipulate blocks or sets of like objects. Children learn about and build language and literacy skills as they use language and symbols in their pretend play.

Besides those examples of how play helps children grow and learn intellectually, children

also learn social skills through play as they work out differences of perspective--for example, sharing, cooperating, turn taking. Children grow and learn emotionally and gain confidence and self respect through their successful play activities. And of course, play also helps children grow physically as they gain coordination, strength, agility, and other basic physical skills.

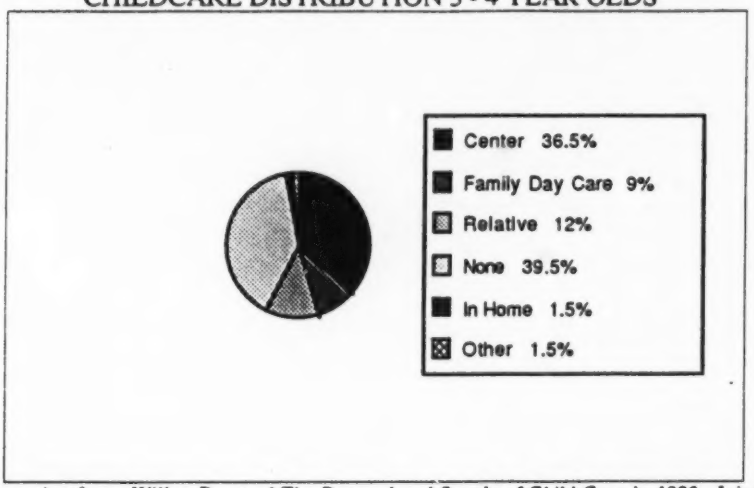
Currently, in America and throughout the world, there is a growing trend towards recognizing the importance of the early years in the total education of the child (Boyer, 1991). Learning starts at birth. What happens during the first five years is actually the foundation for the more formal, abstract, and structured learning that happens after age eight. And play is an integral part of this foundation. KinderCare, the largest childcare provider in America, has play and developmentally appropriate experiences as the focus of its educational programming. Many other countries have fine early childhood programs also. I recently visited the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy, preschools in Jordan, and preschools in Tokyo. All of these schools also had the child's right to play as the focus of their programming.

The preschools in Italy encouraged children to play with many materials and art media. Children were free to choose from a variety of activities, materials, and toys. The centers were alive with activity, curiosity, language, creativity, and positive interactions.

The same type of activity, play, and choice was evident in Tokyo preschools. Interestingly, the primary schools that I visited in Tokyo alternated instructional periods with long periods of outdoor play. For example, children studied for 90 minutes, then went outdoors to play for 30 minutes. Then the pattern would be repeated. Play was also evident indoors as children had manipulatives during math class--not just worksheets and pencils. The Japanese, while admired for their high test scores, should be admired for their commitment to play also. The relationship between academic success and play is quite clear.

Despite the many fine examples mentioned here today, preschool education in general has a wide range of availability in different countries. In the United States only 36.5 percent of 3 to 4 year olds attend a center based program. 24% of this same age group receive care, not preschool education. 39.5 % receive no supplemental care outside the home (Willer, et al, 1990).

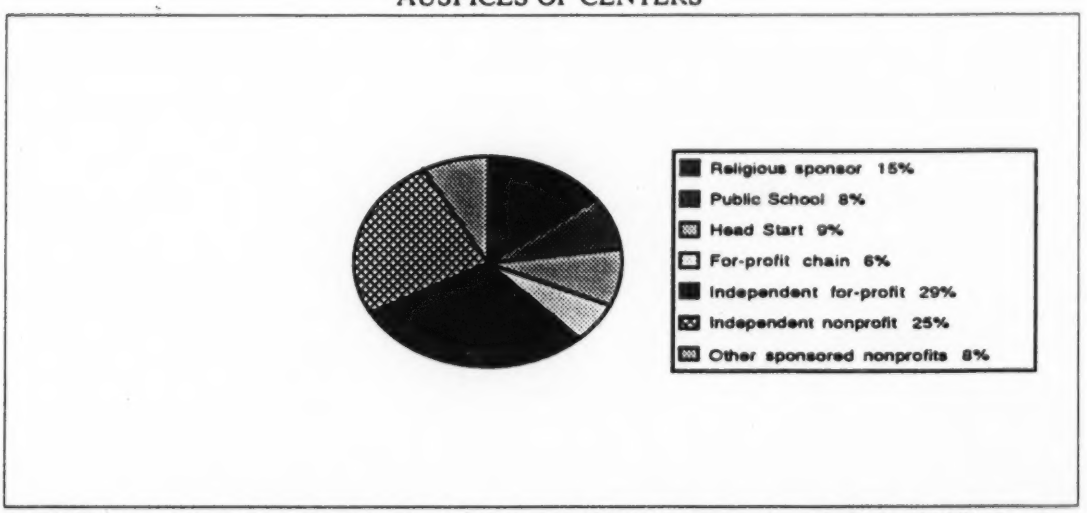
CHILDCARE DISTRIBUTION 3 - 4 YEAR OLDS



(fig. 1) based on information from: Willer, B., et. al.*The Demand and Supply of Child Care in 1990. Joint findings from The National Child Care Survey 1990 and A Profile of Child Care Settings.* Washington, D.C.: NAEYC

Center based preschool programs, however, do not guarantee a quality, play-oriented experience. There are approximately 80,000 center based preschool programs, which may or may not even be licensed depending on the type of center (Willer, et al, 1990). And only 2.5 percent of those programs are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, our professional credentialing agency for early childhood programs.

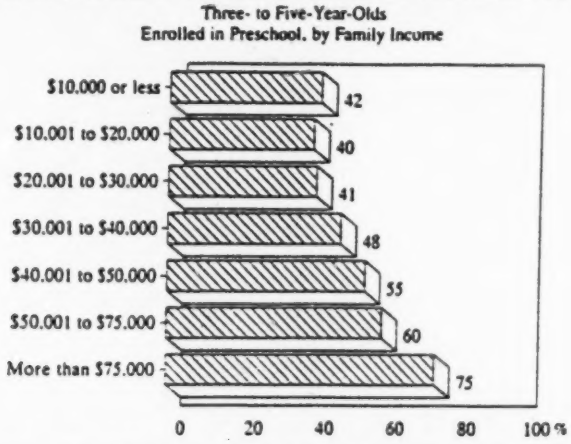
AUSPICES OF CENTERS



(fig 2) Willer, B., et. al.*The Demand and Supply of Child Care in 1990. Joint findings from The National Child Care Survey 1990 and A Profile of Child Care Settings.* Washington, D.C.: NAEYC

Unfortunately preschool enrolment of any type in America is correlated to family income. Children from families earning over $75,000 attend preschool at a 75% rate, while children from families earning less then $30,000 attend preschool at only a 42% or less rate (Boyer, 1991).

THREE TO FIVE YEAR OLDS ENROLLED IN CENTERS BY FAMILY INCOME



(fig. 3) National Center for Education Statistics, 1992, in The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners (Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel, 1991.

In other countries, family income does not determine preschool attendance (Boyer, 1991). In France, 97% of 3-5 year olds attend preschool. In Belgium, 95% of this same age group attend preschool. In Italy, 87%. In Germany 80%. In Denmark 80%. In Sweden and Finland, 70%. These countries heavily subsidize their preschool programs and they are free and voluntary and play oriented (Olmsted and Weikart,1989: Kamerman, 1989; and Boyer, 1991).

Many developing countries, however, while recognizing that education is the key to unlocking the door of economic disparity, have neither the money nor the commitment to ensure quality, play oriented early childhood education for their populations. Many of these third world countries have less than a 20% graduation rate for even primary education, let alone preschool programs (UNICEF,1990,b and c).

Granting children the right to food and survival, to shelter and protection, to development and education, to freedom and participation---and the right to leisure and play--was the easy part. *Guaranteeing* children those same rights is much, much more difficult. Our responsibility to the children of the world is to give them the best we have to give. To give children the opportunity to be children in their early years. And to give children the opportunity to play, grow, and learn.

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